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A Modern Plague

Over the course of history, plague and sickness ravage nations time and time again. Whether a physical sickness like the black plague, or a political sickness such as communism, societies suffer from various ailments and require attention and healing. In the 1960s, a social plague of racial injustice attacked America, particularly in the southern states, calling for a stand against such sickness and a determination to find healing. Martin Luther King Jr. stood at the forefront of this search for a remedy, and spoke of his efforts in “Letter from Birmingham Jail” while writing to his fellow clergymen who had condemned King’s actions and public protests in the name of justice. Martin Luther King Jr. effectively persuades his coldhearted audience through his use of ethos, pathos, and logos spread throughout a rousing letter that calls everyone to take action and defend justice.

King uses a deliberative discourse style to present a strong letter to his opponents. Though not written specifically to lawmakers as most deliberative pieces, King writes to the church leaders, men of influence on the behavior of communities, and calls for them to support justice alongside the government. “My Dear Fellow Clergymen,” he writes, addressing his audience immediately. The letter also remains political in nature, with King seeking just laws and organizing a campaign. “In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action,” King says, displaying his political intentions (6). He writes in an attempt to call people to action and prove to people eradicating racism as expedient, saying, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to

justice everywhere,” thus motivating participation in his movement in the name of justice (4).

Additionally, the letter deals with the future and what should happen. “One day, the South will know that when these disinherited children of God [(black people of America)] sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for what is best,” King says, speaking of how the future ought to hold equality for all races as more and more individuals support his cause. Thus, King presents a strong piece in a deliberative style.

Greeting his audience and presenting his topic in the first few paragraphs, King gives a strong corrective introduction to his deliberative discourse. Other clergymen looked upon King’s actions and gave harsh criticism, to which King chose to respond. As all corrective introductions, this introduction acknowledges a neglected and misunderstood situation, preparing the audience to hear the solution. King responds to the criticism of his efforts in Birmingham, explaining the invalidity of such critique and displaying the necessity of his presence in the city. “If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence...But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms,” King says, revealing his intentions to correct his audience. “...I am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town,” he adds, explaining his presence in Birmingham (3). Through this effective introduction, King explains his intent both in the letter and in Birmingham, preparing his audience to see the error in their previous criticism.

Presenting a straightforward yet powerful thesis in his introduction, King clearly states the purpose of his argument. “But more basically,” he writes, “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here” (3). With this sentence King answers the accusations of his audience who claim that he should have stayed away from the city, as well as stating his purpose: to combat injustice,

even away from home. Throughout the letter, King continually emphasizes the racial injustice in Birmingham and throughout America. “Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever,” he explains, showing his reasoning for fighting injustice (30). King also specifically gives his reasoning for engaging in Birmingham, saying “Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known” (6). He proceeds to list different offenses including mistreatment in court, attacks on churches and homes, and lack of proper negotiation and attention (6). Again, he presses his point, describing the black community as “[a]bused and scorned” (44). Throughout the entire letter, King continually returns to the point of injustice, repeatedly displaying his cause and supporting his thesis, driving his piece with a strong central argument.

Four impactful questions take the place of typical classical arrangement and propel King’s argument with compelling drive, defending his thesis. First, King uses his thesis to answer his audience’s question of why he ended up in Birmingham. His response sets the stage for his letter, declaring that he came to Birmingham to defend justice in paragraph three. This leads into his second question in paragraphs ten and eleven, where he explains why he used direct action as opposed to negotiation. “Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue,” King answers, claiming that Birmingham would never have fought injustice without pressure (10). His third question in paragraphs twelve and thirteen expands on this, addressing the decision to take a stand instead of waiting for the city’s new administration to make changes. Claiming that the city administration has not and will not move towards justice, King states, “My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure” (12). His final question spans paragraphs fifteen through twenty-two, dealing with the issue of why he broke the law, and how he decided

which laws to break. Proposing that unjust laws require disobedience, King answers his audience confidently and persuasively. “[O]ne has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws,” King says, defining those laws as, “a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself” (15, 17). Through this series of questions and answers, King takes down his opposition point by point, successfully defending his cause and supporting justice.

Following his questions and answers, King uses three disappointments to effectively further his argument. Paragraphs twenty-three through twenty-six mark King’s first disappointment: the white moderate. Frustrated with the white moderate’s lack of action, King says they encourage injustice through their passiveness. “[T]he white moderate...prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice,” King declares, displaying the indifference towards injustice and supporting his argument (23). Another disappointment lies in paragraphs thirty-four through forty-four, dealing with King’s disappointment in the church. The church had turned its face from justice and King’s cause and place as morally right. “...I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause...But again I have been disappointed” (37). Pointing out injustice in Birmingham through the church’s blindness, King defends his argument and rebukes the church’s disappointing behavior. Finally, with a third disappointment in paragraphs forty-five and forty-six, King explains his extreme dissatisfaction with the admiration of the police. “I doubt that you would so quickly commend the policemen if you were to observe their ugly and inhuman treatment of Negroes here in the city jail,” King writes, condemning the policemen and those who blindly support them. This specific example of injustice in Birmingham proves as a striking addition to his argument, and with this and his other disappointments, King calls out his opposition on their wrongful actions or lack of action,

demanding justice and revealing injustice.

Using an impactful logical appeal with no strong fallacies, King effectively argues his point throughout his disappointments and questions. During his letter, King uses many cause and effect relationships to show the lack of logic in his opponents' arguments. "In your statement you assert that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But is this a logical assertion? Isn't this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery?" King asks, comparing the relationship of a robber and a rich man to the black community's situation (25). Continuing to focus on his opponents' flawed logic, King says, "I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress" (24). Through this statement, King shows how if the white moderate thought logically about their laws, they would recognize that they themselves prevent social progress by allowing injustice and promoting oppression. These forceful lines of argument support King's efforts and show his mastery of appealing to logic.

Additionally utilizing ethos, King builds his credibility in order to maintain his impactful argument. Showing himself as a man who loves justice, has adamant integrity, has virtue, abhors oppression and bad reasoning, and has a reverence for worthy characters, King creates a pristine ethical appeal. "[O]ne has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws," King explains, showing how his disobedience of the law actually came from a desire to follow morality (15). "In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law...One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty," he says, showing his dedication to justice and hate of oppression, as well as arguing that he broke an unjust law in a morally correct manner (21). King also particularly plays on the use of Biblical comparisons in order to

further appeal to his clerical audience. Comparing his efforts to those of other Biblical men such as Paul, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and even Jesus, he presents himself as a man of the Bible, seeking after God (3, 21, 31). He writes, “It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake” (21). Later on, King lists names of so many great men, showing his reverence for worthy characters and displaying how others such as Martin Luther, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and so many others took a stand for their beliefs and fought for morality. Therefore King effectively utilized ethos in his letter.

One final strong appeal to the audience through emotion adds even more impact to King’s argument. Using direct examples of the dehumanizing and hurtful actions towards colored people in Birmingham and throughout America, King shows injustice and plays on the emotion of shame. “...[W]e have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights...when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers and drown your brothers and sisters...when your first name becomes ‘nigger’...There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over,” King writes, explaining that the black community has suffered profusely and unjustly, finally running out of patience and forcing conflict (14). The horror of these actions towards colored people creates a shame for all who read it, faced with specific instances of white abuse and wrong doing. Furthermore, King plays on peoples’ fear, claiming that the injustice suffered by the black community threatens the pillars of justice across America. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny” (4). This type of mentality threatens everyone’s freedom, creating fear and attention towards King’s argument. Through these emotional tactics, King forcefully persuades his audience to listen and take action towards his cause.

In the last four paragraphs of his discourse, King effectively concludes with vivid

language that rouses emotions and demands the audience to participate in his efforts.

Reemphasizing his desire for justice and determination to eradicate injustice, King speaks of his fellow protestors as heroes and men and women who will go down in history (47). He speaks of his desires for the future of unity among black and white people in the south, and says, “Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away” (50). With this emotionally charged language, King inspires the audience to listen once again and take his points to heart. Therefore, he concludes successfully and powerfully.

Faced with a cruel audience who had openly condoned injustice, King takes a stand and presents a compelling argument full of ethos, pathos, and logos. Appalled at the injustice and blindness towards it, King refused to let such actions slip by, and addressed them in a formal, educated style that allowed his words to last through the years. Justice remains under pressure at all times in this fallen world, and King spoke powerfully and fought to defend justice no matter the cost. Today, injustice still plagues the world. Whether through the extermination of unborn children, the hatred towards the gay community, the lingering, shameful racism, or the unkindness towards various religions, justice remains threatened. Over time, humanity continually forgets how to love the different people among humanity. As King exemplified it takes effort, organization, and sacrifice to make changes and fight to cure injustice. Despite the difficulty, this will always remain a worthy cause, and sometimes, as in King’s place, success lies just a few years away, begging for people to take action and move towards it.